DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 438 CS 011 337

AUTHOR Winters, Clyde A.
TITLE Non-Standard English and Reading.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Black Students; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *Language Acquisition; Language Styles; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Reading Difficulties; *Second Language Learning; *Standard Spoken Usage; Urban Language
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

When children (particularly African Americans) have a different orthography, phonemic system, and deep structure from Standard American English (SAE) speakers, they may have difficulty grasping the correct SAE phonemes represented by the symbols and reading in general. Language acquisition is natural learning centered around the interaction of parent and child, and child and community. Research indicates that among disadvantaged urban populations, no matter the race, many students have poor reading comprehension skills due to failure of parents providing "corrective feedback." Ebonics is a dialect made up of an English vocabulary and an African structure/grammar. Researchers disagree over the effects on reading comprehension of the syntactical differences between SAE and "Ebonics" (ebony phonics, also called Vernacular Black English). Ebonic speakers use an African morphology and syntax (analogous to the grammars of the Niger-Kordofanian family of languages) with an English vocabulary. The morphology and phonology of Ebonics causes many African American children to have reading problems. Ebonics is not just a dialect of English, it is a "different" speech analogous to African languages in structure and some vocabulary. Perhaps African American children could benefit from learning English as a Second Language. (Contains 18 references.) (RS)

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NON-STANDARD ENGLISH AND READING

BY

CLYDE A. WINTERS

UTHMAN DAN FODIO INSTITUTE

11541 SOUTH PEORIA

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60643

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ABSTRACT

Many African-American children have a reading difficulty. The focus of this study is the possible role black dialect plays in creating reading difficulties among some black children. It will show that Vernacular Black English causes reading difficulties for some African-American children that may be corrected more efficiently by learning English as a Second Language.

NON-STANDARD ENGLISH AND READING

The receptive language form of written language is reading. Although most children learn to read without much difficulty, some children due to dialect differences may have a reading difficulty.

In this paper we will discuss the possible role the black dialect may play in the reading comprehension of African Americans. The basic assumption in learning to read English, is that English speaking children have an intuitive understanding of the sounds of the alphabet. This implied understanding of English resulting from parental modeling of the "standard" speech is suppose to help this child make an association between the sounds of the alphabet and English phonology.

This theory may have validity when we compare the reading ability of children who speak Standard American English (SAE), but does it also apply to minority groups who speak a different dialect than SAE? Research suggest that dialect can and does influence the ability of children to read materials not written in their own dialect. Goodman (1969 ,14-15) observed that "the more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and dialect of learning the more difficult will be the task of learning to read".

In this paper we will discuss the hypothesis that when children have a different orthography, phonemic system and deep structure from SAE speakers, they may have difficulty grasping

the correct SAE phonemes represented by the symbols and reading in general. Put simply our theory is that the African deep structure of black English causes many reading difficulties for some African American children.

Environment can often explain the language and speech of a child. This result's from the fact that a child's language is often based on the language of the primary child care provider, who allows the child to hear language often and become regularly involved in practicing the language. Thusly, it is usually the mother that models the appropriate language

Speech and language are culture specific, i.e., we learn our language and speech patterns from our parents modeling acceptable speech for the communities in which we live. As a result language acquisition is natural learning centered around the interaction of parent and child, and child and community. Wolcott (1982,93) noted , "that our speech resembles the speech of somebody rather than a generalized "everybody" implicates a process of modeling. Modeling seems critical for learning language and for learning culture as well". Hood (1973,48) writing on the same theme made it clear that , "therefore , the learning of words, names and objects specific behavior and expected verbal responses will differ according to the social glasses worn by students. These social glasses are prescribed before birth, having been ordered by the situation in which the child is conceived".

Research indicates that among disadvantage urban population no-matter the race, we find many students with poor reading

comprehension skills, due to failure of parents providing "corrective feedback". As a result "their language structure is such that they find it difficult to abstract information, to serrate and classify and therefore to readily grasp not only the idea of such things as phonic generalizations or rules but also to understand abstract concepts met in reading ranch as 'zoo' or 'library'. "(Goodacre 1971, 101-102) But as noted by Maria (1989 ,296) ,"Indeed, one of the major disadvantages these [disadvantaged] children experience with regard to reading comprehension is the absence of experiences which are more common for middle class children and thus taken for granted by authors of children's texts."

The native language of a child can determine his success in reading. Many researchers have long recognized that some children fail to achieve reading skills because of the difference between the language spoken by the students and the language of the school. (Baratz 1970; Williams 1979) Prof. Goodman (1968) observed that "In reading, language that is complete, the child finds function words that serve as markers and structural signals....noun markers, verb markers, conjunctions....He also finds inflectional endings that he has learned to use in his oral language at an early age and he uses these in the decoding process. These also help define the pattern and relationship of elements to each other and the whole".

Baratz (1969) and Labov (1965) believe that many African Americans have reading problems as a result of differences in the

phonology and syntax of Ebonics and SAE. The linguistic differences between Ebonics and SAE therefore interferes with many African Americans learning to read. (Johnson 1969;Bartel and Axelrod 1973; Cazden 1970; Baratz 1969; Shuy 1966; Bougere 1981)

Stewart (1969) and Baratz (1969) believe that it is the syntactical differences between SAE and Ebonics that profoundly affect the reading comprehension of African American children. This view is rejected by other researchers who claim the phonological features of Ebonics fails to impede the process of reading comprehension among African American children (Melmed 1971; Cohen and Kornfield 1970)

In a recent study of African American readers Havard (1982,49) compared the reading comprehension scores of African American students after they read stories in VBE and SAE to determine if dialect interferes with reading comprehension. She found that "Black dialect , in itself, does not adversely affect comprehension nor ultimately cause poor reading achievement in black children".

Many African-American children do not speak standard American English. They speak a dialect of English called 1) Vernacular Black English or Ebonics (ebony phonics: "Black Sounds"). Ebonics is the uniform dialect used by African American youth in the intercity of large urban areas, and rural areas of the south. It is also the language used by many African American adults when they are speaking casually.

Many sociolinguists believe that VBE is derived from a

creole language spoken in the deep south before emancipation. (Dillard 1972) Sociolinguists that adhere to this view believe that VBE is derived from an earlier British dialect.

Other linguist believe that VBE is really the result of the social isolation of African Americans during slavery which forced them to learn English words, but allowed them to live in communities separated from SAE speakers. This separation of the Euro-Americans generally, and African American slaves made it possible for an African deep structure to remain constant among this people which interferes with the reading of many African American children.

Ebonics is a dialect made up of an English vocabulary and an African structure/ grammar. Dr. Ernie Smith of the California State University at Fullerton noted that Ebonics:

> ""follows the African deep structure in every respect when it is different from English, and there is solid empirical linguistic evidence of identical deep structure or syntactical patterns in West African languages". (Clegg 1980, 16)

Many linguist argue that Ebonics has its own rules and grammar.(Rickford 1986) This is absolutely true. (Clegg 1980) The grammar of Ebonics is analogous to the grammars of the Niger-Kordofanian family of languages. Niger-Kordofanian languages are spoken in West Africa.

Social separation of racial groups in America has led to the continuity of Niger-Kordofanian linguistic features among African

Americans. The ethnolingistic theory of Ebonics is a more accurate description of African American speech patterns than VBE, which suggest that the speech of many African Americans is wholly a dialect of SAE.

Traditionally Ebonics is seen as a form of SAE with a transformed phonology or surface structure pursuant to the transformational theory of linguistics. For example, SAE 'Do you understand English'; in Ebonics 'D'ya dig black talk'; and Wolof (an African language) '**Dege nga Olof**' ('Do you understand Wolof').

But Ebonic speakers use an African 1) morphology and 2) syntax, with an English vocabulary as observed above. As a result Ebonics and SAE are mutually intelligible, but like German and Norwegian they are distinct languages.

The pronunciation of Ebonic words show NK influences in two broad categories: 1) consonant clustering avoidance and 2) absent phonics.(Fretz 1985) Both NK and Ebonic speakers avoid the pronounciation of consonant clusters:

SAE	Ebonics
left	lef
object	objek
desk	dess
fast	fas

Certain SAE sounds are not found in Ebonics and NK, as a result we have absent phonics:

SAE	Ebonics

think	tink
then	den
arithmetic	arifmetic
yours	yohz
drift	drif
build	bil

The morphology and phonology of Ebonics causes many African American children to have reading problems. This difficulty may results from the differences between the pronunciation and spelling of words in Ebonics, and the pronunciation and spelling of words in SAE. Goodacre (1971, 80) noted that "Even more difficulties occur in the pronunciation of vowels and end sounds. One study found that of the 220 words in Dolch's list of basic words in the English language, Negro dialect of this type changed 158". This dropping of certain phonemes or letters by some Ebonic speakers while reading create difficulty for the child trying to attack new words and sound them out. Fasold (1969) has made it clear that among many readers whoes language show an above average importance of vowels, while reading the words **will not** change them to **won't**; and **do not** to **don't**.

In conclusion, Ebonics is not just a dialect of English, it is a "different" speech analogous to African languages in structure and some vocabulary. This genetically encoded linguistic principle was reinforced in the African community as a result of the social isolation of many African Americans and Euro-Americans since slavery. This isolation of blacks, allowed

environmental stimuli to trigger and reinforce NK syntactical patterns among Ebonic speakers .The SAE pattern would probably have erased NK grammatical structures if African Americans and Euro-Americans would have been fully assimilated rather than live in separate worlds, in the same country.

Given the information outlined above, Ebonics is a foreign language, and under Federal law, bilingual education should be provided Ebonic speakers.The allocation of federal dollars to support SAE instruction among African Americans, may enable many more Ebonic speakers to not only finally learn SAE, and many of them to perform better academically in the area of reading.

This linguistic reality makes it clear that some speakers of Ebonics might be prone to reading difficulties because of the syntactical differences between Ebonics and SAE at the deep structural level. This view is supported by the research of Baratz (1969 and Labov (1965).

This suggest that African American children could benefit from learning English as a Second Language. The teaching of ESL might help African Americans become better learners by learning SAE, rather than assuming that Ebonics is just non-standard English.

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